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ABSTRACT

The pleasures and benefits of talking to one's self are presented in the context of self-understanding. The types of "self-talk" noted are writing, the trying out of future conversations to one's self, and soliloquizing before groups of people. Futhermore, speculation about the relation of the right and left hemispheres of the brain and communication between the two is offered. Work by John Lilly is used to delineate the various sophisticated levels of "self-talk" as self-consciousness, "the level of competence," critical awareness, and awareness of the "god-like side of our lives." (CH)

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THE PLEASURES OF SELF-TALK*

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In a recent strip of the Blondie cartoon Dagwood's boss hears Dagwood talking and enters Dagwood's office asking "Are you talking to someone?" and Dagwood says "yes." "To whom?" asks the boss as he looks about seeing nobody but Dagwood. "To myself," replies Dagwood. "What were you saying?" Dagwood's answer: "I don't know. I wasn't listening."

My assignment here today is to discuss the pleasures of talking to oneself. And if the analysis of this paper is correct, I do not think Dagwood is quite accurate in saying he was talking to himself, since he confesses he does not know what he was saying. If one talks to himself it is implied that he listens to himself. Self-talk -- or intrapersonal speech -- is an internalization of interpersonal speech. If you talk to someone, you must listen to him too. A conversation which is a series of interactive assertions without responses from the others is not an act of communication. So my first observation would be that when we talk to ourselves we also answer. Without two-way interaction, even within one person, there is no transaction, or communication.

I want to follow that up a little bit.

I am reminded of the old argument. If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is there to hear it, is there a noise? If one argues from the

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definition of sound as a frequency of vibration of air or other material, then of course, there is always noise. Even when I say, as I might, if I were up in the deep woods of Canada (instead of being here in the noisy city), "the silence is almost overwhelming," that does not mean there is no sound. Always, there are frequencies of vibration below and above those to which my ears respond. Radio and television operate in frequencies that no human ear has ever heard. But this is all nonsense talk -- when one speaks about sound within a definition of communication. Communication in a person or between persons or person and animal implies interaction, a two-way process -- and transaction, a mutual change in awareness or being. I don't know whether there is interaction and transaction between a person and thing or not, because I cannot tell what happens to a tree when I look at it or speak to it. I am reminded of Carl Sandburg's comment about the absentminded professor who bumped into a tree and said "Excuse me, I thought you were a tree." But somehow I have a feeling I am getting off the subject. On the other hand, when I am involved in talking about the pleasures of self-talk I have a right to get off the subject, as perceived from the view of any other person, because in fact, I am never off the subject when I am talking to myself. But I am respectful of you and I really don't think I should monologue further in your presence. You might find out how crazy I am. So let me return to the logic enforced by communication with other people.

There are three ways we can carry out the act of talking to ourselves. Silently, as I am doing now as I write this paper. We usually call this verbal thinking. Yet since there is assertion and response there exists the fundamental ingredients of self-talk.

Second, we can actually talk to ourselves aloud in the presence of no one. And I often do this because silent talk is truncated or telegraphic. And I do not always know whether my telegrams make sense. I can test them out by expanding them into the syntax of interpersonal communication. Almost all the good public speeches I have prepared have been prepared in part this way. I outline what seems in my silent speech to make sense. Then I say the speech aloud, to myself, to see if I can say what is in the outline, and to see if I can sense the feelings the notes engender, and to find out whether examples come that clarify, and to see if I can say the speech in the time allotted me. But, also, I sometimes talk to myself aloud to see what I shall say in a forthcoming interpersonal one-to-one situation, especially if I am dealing with a delicate matter. I do not have the time to allot exclusively to these personal conversations so I usually talk them out with myself when I am shaving or driving to the office. One interesting thing I have learned about my peculiar brand of self-talk in preparation for confrontation with another person is that I am much more aggressive and vindictive in my self-talk than I am in the actual situation. The self-talk not only clarifies for me what I am wanting to say but dissipates my hostilities so I can confront a person with confirmation of him. I am generally considered a reasonable person; I would probably be an unclear irascible character if I did not talk aloud to myself. President Lincoln said he often carried on this personal therapy by writing angry letters to people who had irritated him -- then threw them, the letters, in the wastepaper basket.

The third way to carry out self-talk is to monologue or soliloquize in the presence of others. I do not like this and I get little pleasure

from it, though I do it sometimes. I do it when I am not sure of my own responses to myself, depending then upon the responses of the other to see if I really want to talk that way. Or I, perhaps too often, do this as a teacher before a class, in order to try out an idea for fit, watching the responses of my students. It's not a bad thing, if held in careful check, because those are the hours I grow in the presence of students and many students cannot know the pleasure of growing in self-talk, unless a professor models it for them.

But some of you may be saying, to yourselves, is a soliloquy, silent or otherwise, really a case of internalized interpersonal communication? Are George Herbert Mead's "I" and "me" a reality? Do we really assert and respond? How can we really know? Is self-talk a fantasy? Is this self examination of self-talk a description of something we can never know anything about?

On the other hand, if self-talk does exist, what is the mechanism for its functioning?

In recent years considerable research has made it clear that we do not have one brain, but two, that the hemispheres of the brain operate in conjunction, but also separately, that each hemisphere has its own unique functions. These functions are mediated by the fibers that join the two, the corpus collosum.[1] As all speech teachers know, Broca's area is the center of the speech coordinating functions and this is located in the left hemisphere, for the right handed person. The research of the past

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[1] R. W. Sperry, "The Great Cerebral Commisure," Scientific American, January, 1964, 42-52.

ten years with brain injured persons and persons who have incapacitating epileptic seizures in which the fibers that join the hemispheres have been severed, demonstrates that the left hemisphere dominates the interaction process of the brain in some people, and the right hemisphere dominates in other people. The degree of domination varies from person to person, most particularly in men. And more important, the left hemisphere is our verbal and logical brain; our right hemisphere, our subconscious and unconscious brain. The functions of our two brains are as follows:[2]

Left Hemisphere	Right Hemisphere
Verbal	Pre-verbal
Analytic	Synthetic
Abstract	Concrete
Rational	Emotional
Temporal	Spatial
Digital	Analogic
Objective	Subjective
Active	Passive
Tense	Relaxed
Euphoric	Depressed
Sympathetic	Parasympathetic
Propositional	Oppositional

The left side of the brain is the intellectual side of man; the right side, the intuitive and emotional side. Our left hemisphere asserts, our right hemisphere provides a kind of delayed feedback or echo to the left side. It is by means of the right side that we correct the logical impulsiveness of the left. The word "but" and all the qualifications and corrections in our speech arise from the pre-verbal feelings of the right hemisphere. The most primitive speech of man, his grunts, cursings, and ejaculations of glee, come when the right dominates the left; and our

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[2]Paul Bokan, "The Eyes Have It," Psychology Today, April, 1971, 64-70, 67.

statements of values and religious beliefs are entwined with our emotions when the left dominates the right. If the left dominates most of the time, we are highly logical, objective, and impersonal. If the right hemisphere dominates most of our life, we are less verbal, less clear, more artistic, intuitive, and creative.

When one looks up and to the left his thought is guided by his feelings. When he looks up and to the right he is more logical and objective. Some of us are more "left lookers" and some of us more "right lookers." And men are more one or the other, than are women. Women are less schizophrenic[3], it would seem. And hospital records bear this out.

The preceding discussion has been perhaps too extended, the main point for this paper perhaps lost. What I am trying to do is to indicate that brain research shows that self-talk is provided by our physical design. So my reflections on the functions of self-talk in the first part of the paper are probably not pure fantasy, though indeed they must surely be partially incorrect -- as indeed must be the research cited here. We know very little for sure.

I hope that enroute I have been demonstrating the pleasures of self-talk for I am enjoying myself in the writing of this paper. But I want to proceed to analyze the basic role and great contribution of self-talk to our lives. And I go to John Lilly's autobiographical explorations of his own inner space for my design.[4] While Lilly does not discuss his views in

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[3]The "lower" animals are not so likely to go "crazy" as men because the differentiation of their hemispheric functions is not so great, so the research on cats and monkeys indicate.

[4]John C. Lilly, Center of the Cyclone (New York: Julian Press, 1972).

terms of self-talk he sets up a description of the levels of consciousness that I find useful. In the minus zero levels in which a person is experiencing negative feelings and depression Lilly calls the problem that of "egotism." And in the exploration one senses that Lilly is talking about behavior which is constrained by a mirror or monitoring effect, a commentary on one's experience which is generated by self-doubt and inhibition. In all these minus levels of consciousness descending into hell the self-talk is obviously not a pleasure, but a stress. As one ascends the levels of consciousness he reaches a level Lilly calls the "professional level." I would call it the level of competence. In this state of consciousness one is a doer, and loses his self consciousness to an immersement in the act. As illustration Lilly refers to the competent skier, whose "consciousness" is in the act. He dares not lower his awareness to fear of his possible fall and injury, nor must he rise above the act to self congratulatory commentary on the act. In either case he would lose the lostness of self we have in the competent act. I am not sure how to describe this state of non-self-talk or how the hemispheres interact to produce this level of "consciousness," but we all know it if our lives are good. I am inclined to say the hemispheric dominance is probably close to equal, but not equal, thus not in conflict, but with the right side in command. The verbal or conscious is subdued, thus consciousness is almost unconscious. Albert Einstein was once asked how he thought out his formulations. He said he did not know, because the act took place in a state of unawareness, and it was only when he became aware of his effort to explain to himself what he had perceived that he knew he had perceived. Perhaps in the level

of competent consciousness there is no self-talk. The right hemisphere has subdued assertion and self awareness. In this state of creative "consciousness" we revert to behavior Piaget noted in children under age seven, where there is no distinction between fantasy and reality -- no echo or corrective effect.

Lilly goes on, however, -- and this is extremely important -- to explain the next higher level of consciousness as that which takes place in those moments when we become aware of what we have achieved, that moment following creation which Einstein noted, when we make commentary on that which has been born in us. These are our great moments of pleasure in self-talk, when we feel a deep peace within, when we marvel at life, when we are amazed with ourselves. At that moment, the left hemisphere is in control, but not yet too much. We are in these moments truly euphoric and our self-talk silent, aloud, or to another person is ecstatic.

But this ecstacy would all die and become meaningless narcissism if something else did not emerge. Now fully self-confirmed because of that ecstatic state of self-talk we become open to others, and we now empathize with others and know others. We are fully joined to ourselves but also to others. We know little or no conflict or fear. We belong.

It is at this level that we transcend the alienation which would be inherent to life if we could only talk to ourselves. As we can talk to ourselves into the torments of hell so we may also talk ourselves into the pleasures of heaven. The latter emerges out of the lostness of self in competent action. I am told by some people that I encompass too much of life in the verbal act -- that there is a world beyond words. I know what they

point to -- the world of the nonverbal acts which emerge out of and excite the right hemisphere of the brain. But man's existential meaning rests in his thanksgiving for his relationships with himself, others, and "the great ground of being." Thanksgiving is a verbal act and is the product of the pleasures of self-talk which, in turn, is the product of the competent and creative act.

So far as I can understand life, there is one other and the greatest pleasure of self-talk. And that is the pleasure or thanksgiving that derives from talking to the god-like side of our lives. I say "god-like." You might prefer that I speak more like Martin Buber and say that God exists, but never shows His face, that God can be seen only in ourselves, or in others, or in nature, that God can be known by man only as a reflected being. It matters little to me how you say it. But it is extremely important, as I see it, to be able to achieve Thoreau's awareness: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away." The person who cannot talk to this god within fails to achieve the highest pleasure of self-talk. Indeed he never becomes a person for he does not know himself.